

We claim:

1. A method of routing packets through a communications network having a plurality of distinct sets of virtual ports, no virtual port belonging to more than one of the distinct sets, a respective distinct broadcast address being assigned to each distinct set of virtual ports, the method comprising:

assigning a respective egress address to each packet entering the network via an ingress virtual port, the respective egress address corresponding to a respective destination address of the entering packet when a correspondence between the destination address and an egress address is known, and the respective egress address being a broadcast egress address corresponding to the set comprising the ingress virtual port when no correspondence between the destination address and an egress address is known; and

routing the packet according to the respective egress address, said routing being restricted to virtual ports belonging to the distinct set of virtual ports which includes the ingress virtual port.

2. A method as defined in claim 1, wherein, when the destination address of the packet is a unicast address and a correspondence between the destination address and a unicast egress address is known:

the step of assigning an egress address comprises assigning the unicast egress address; said unicast egress address corresponding to an egress virtual port belonging to the distinct set of virtual ports which includes the ingress virtual port, the destination address being accessible from said egress virtual port; and

the step of routing the packet comprises routing the packet to said egress virtual port.

3. A method as defined in claim 1, wherein, when the destination address of the packet is a unicast address and no correspondence between the destination address and an egress address is known:

5 the step of assigning an egress address comprises assigning a broadcast egress address corresponding to the distinct set of virtual ports which includes the ingress virtual port; and

10 the step of routing the packet comprises routing the packet to each virtual port, other than the ingress virtual port, of the distinct set of virtual ports which includes the ingress virtual port.

4. A method as defined in claim 1, wherein, when the destination address of the packet is a multicast address:

15 the step of assigning an egress address comprises assigning a broadcast egress address corresponding to the distinct set of virtual ports which includes the ingress virtual port; and

20 the step of routing the packet comprises routing the packet to each virtual port of the distinct set of virtual ports which includes the ingress virtual port other than the ingress virtual port.

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5. A method as defined in claim 1, wherein, when the destination address of the packet is a multicast address and a correspondence between the destination address and a multicast egress address is known:

30 the step of assigning an egress address comprises assigning the multicast egress address, said multicast egress address corresponding to a plurality of virtual ports belonging to the distinct set of virtual ports which includes the ingress virtual port; and

35 the step of routing the packet comprises routing the packet to each virtual port of said plurality of

virtual ports belonging to the distinct set of virtual ports which includes the ingress virtual port.

5 6. A method as defined in claim 1, further comprising:

assigning a respective ingress address to each packet entering the network, the respective ingress address corresponding to a virtual port via which the packet enters the network;

10 using the assigned ingress addresses to populate address association tables; and

using the address association tables to determine correspondences between destination addresses and egress addresses.

15 7. A method as defined in claim 1, further comprising:

adding to each packet entering the network via an ingress virtual port the respective egress address assigned to that packet to provide a corresponding encapsulated packet;

routing the encapsulated packet in the network according to assigned egress address encapsulated in the packet; and

25 removing from each encapsulated packet received at an egress virtual port of the network the egress address assigned to that packet to provide a decapsulated packet.

30 8. A method as defined in claim 7, further comprising:

assigning a respective ingress address to each packet entering the network, the respective ingress address corresponding to the ingress virtual port via  
35 which the packet enters the network;

adding the assigned ingress address to each packet entering the network in providing the corresponding encapsulated packet;

maintaining an address association table  
5 associated with each virtual port of the network, each address association table mapping each of a plurality of egress addresses to at least one corresponding destination address; and

using the address association tables to determine  
10 correspondences between destination addresses and egress addresses, wherein:

on receipt of a packet entering the network via an ingress virtual port, said packet including a source  
15 address, an entry is added to the address association table associated with said ingress virtual port when said address association table does not contain the source address in any destination address field of said address association table, said entry comprising the source  
20 address in a destination address field and the ingress address in a corresponding egress address field; and

on receipt of an encapsulated packet at a virtual port of the network, said encapsulated packet including a  
25 source address and an ingress address, an entry is added to the address association table associated with said virtual port when said address association table does not contain the source address in any destination address field of said address association table, said entry  
30 comprising the source address in a destination address field and the ingress address in a corresponding egress address field.

9. A method as defined in claim 1, wherein:  
35 the step of routing the packet according to the respective egress address comprises routing the packet via trunks of the network; and

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being restricted to virtual ports belonging to the distinct set of virtual ports which includes the ingress virtual port.

5 12. A network as defined in claim 11, wherein, when the destination address of the packet is a unicast address and a correspondence between the destination address and a unicast egress address is known:

each address assigner is operable to assign the  
10 unicast egress address, said unicast egress address corresponding to an egress virtual port belonging to the distinct set of virtual ports which includes the ingress virtual port, the destination address being accessible from said egress virtual port; and

15 each router is operable to route the packet to said egress virtual port.

13. A network as defined in claim 11, wherein, when the destination address of the packet is a unicast  
20 address and no correspondence between the destination address and an egress address is known:

each address assigner is operable to assign a broadcast egress address corresponding to the distinct set of virtual ports which includes the ingress virtual port;  
25 and

each router is operable to route the packet to each virtual port, other than the ingress virtual port, of the distinct set of virtual ports which includes the ingress virtual port.

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14. A network as defined in claim 11, wherein, when the destination address of the packet is a multicast address:

each address assigner is operable to assign a  
35 broadcast egress address corresponding to the distinct set of virtual ports which includes the ingress virtual port; and

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an encapsulator for adding to each packet  
entering the network via an ingress virtual port the

respective egress address assigned to that packet to provide a corresponding encapsulated packet; and

a decapsulator for removing from each encapsulated packet received at an egress virtual port of the network the egress address assigned to that packet to provide a decapsulated packet.

18. A network as defined in claim 17, wherein each address assigner is operable:

10 to assign a respective ingress address to each packet entering the network, the respective ingress address corresponding to the ingress virtual port via which the packet enters the network;

15 to add the assigned ingress address to each packet entering the network in providing the corresponding encapsulated packet;

20 to maintain an address association table, the address association table mapping each egress address of a plurality of egress addresses to at least one corresponding destination address; and

to use the address association table to determine correspondences between destination addresses and egress addresses, wherein:

25 on receipt of a packet entering the network via a virtual port corresponding to an ingress address, said packet including a source address, the address assigner is operable to add an entry to the address association table when the address association table does not contain the  
30 source address in any destination address field of the address association table, said entry comprising the source address in a destination address field and the ingress address in a corresponding egress address field; and

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on receipt of an encapsulated packet at a virtual port of the network, said encapsulated packet including a



source address and an ingress address, the address assigner is operable to add an entry to the address association table associated with said virtual port when said address association table does not contain the source address in any destination address field of said address association table, said entry comprising the source address in a destination address field and the ingress address in a corresponding egress address field.

10            19. A network as defined in claim 11, further comprising a plurality of trunks interconnecting routers of the network, wherein:

each router is operable to route the packet via trunks of the network; and

15            when the packet is assigned a broadcast egress address corresponding to a distinct set of virtual ports, each router is operable to route the packet via a restricted set of trunks containing only those trunks required to reach virtual ports in the distinct set of  
20 virtual ports corresponding to said broadcast egress address.

20            20. A network as defined in claim 15, further comprising a plurality of trunks interconnecting routers of the network, wherein:

each router is operable to route the packet via trunks of the network; and

30            when the packet is assigned a multicast egress address corresponding to a plurality of virtual ports in a distinct set of virtual ports, each router is operable to route the packet via a restricted set of trunks containing only those trunks required to reach virtual ports in the plurality of virtual ports corresponding to said multicast egress address.

35            21. A routing device for a communications network, the routing device comprising:

a plurality of distinct subsets of virtual ports,  
no virtual port belonging to more than one of the distinct  
subsets, each distinct subset being a subset of a  
respective distinct set of virtual ports of the network  
5 and each distinct set being assigned a respective distinct  
broadcast address;

at least one address assigner operable to assign  
a respective egress address to each packet entering the  
network via an ingress virtual port of the routing device,  
10 the respective egress address corresponding to a  
respective destination address of the entering packet when  
a correspondence between the destination address and an  
egress address is known, and the respective egress address  
being a broadcast egress address corresponding to the set  
15 comprising the ingress virtual port when no correspondence  
between the destination address and an egress address is  
known; and

at least one router operable to route the packet  
according to the respective egress address, said routing  
20 being restricted to virtual ports belonging to the  
distinct set of virtual ports which includes the ingress  
virtual port.

22. A routing device as defined in claim 21,  
25 wherein, when the destination address of the packet is a  
unicast address and a correspondence between the  
destination address and a unicast egress address is known:

each address assigner is operable to assign the  
unicast egress address, said unicast egress address  
30 corresponding to an egress virtual port belonging to the  
distinct set of virtual ports which includes the ingress  
virtual port, the destination address being accessible  
from said egress virtual port; and

each router is operable to route the packet to  
35 said egress virtual port.

23. A routing device as defined in claim 21, wherein, when the destination address of the packet is a unicast address and no correspondence between the destination address and an egress address is known:

5 each address assigner is operable to assign a broadcast egress address corresponding to the distinct set of virtual ports which includes the ingress virtual port; and

10 each router is operable to route the packet to each virtual port of the distinct set of virtual ports which includes the ingress virtual port other than the ingress virtual port.

24. A routing device as defined in claim 21, wherein, when the destination address of the packet is a multicast address:

15 each address assigner is operable to assign a broadcast egress address corresponding to the distinct set of virtual ports which includes the ingress virtual port; and

20 each router is operable to route the packet to each virtual port of the distinct set of virtual ports which includes the ingress virtual port other than the ingress virtual port.

25 25. A routing device as defined in claim 21, wherein, when the destination address of the packet is a multicast address and a correspondence between the destination address and a multicast egress address is known:

30 each address assigner is operable to assign the multicast egress address, said multicast egress address corresponding to a plurality of virtual ports belonging to the distinct set of virtual ports which includes the ingress virtual port; and

35 each router is operable to route the packet to each virtual port of said plurality of virtual ports

belonging to the distinct set of virtual ports which includes the ingress virtual port.

26. A routing device as defined in claim 21,  
5 wherein each address assigner comprises an address association table and is operable:

to assign a respective ingress address to each packet entering the network, the respective ingress address corresponding to a virtual port via which the  
10 packet enters the network;

to use assigned ingress addresses to populate the address association table; and

to use the address association table to determine correspondences between destination addresses and egress  
15 addresses.

27. A routing device as defined in claim 21,  
wherein each address assigner comprises:

an encapsulator for adding to each packet  
20 entering the network via an ingress virtual port the respective egress address assigned to that packet to provide a corresponding encapsulated packet; and

a decapsulator for removing from each  
encapsulated packet received at an egress virtual port of  
25 the network the egress address assigned to that packet to provide a decapusulated packet.

28. A routing device as defined in claim 27,  
wherein each address assigner is operable:

30 to assign a respective ingress address to each packet entering the network, the respective ingress address corresponding to the ingress virtual port via which the packet enters the network;

to add the assigned ingress address to each  
35 packet entering the network in providing the corresponding encapsulated packet;

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to maintain an address association table, the address association table mapping each of a plurality of egress addresses to at least one corresponding destination address; and

5 to use the address association table to determine correspondences between destination addresses and egress addresses, wherein:

10 on receipt of a packet entering the network via a virtual port associated with an ingress address, said packet including a source address, the address assigner is operable to add an entry to the address association table when the address association table does not contain the source address in any destination address field of the address association table, said entry comprising the source address in a destination address field and the ingress address in a corresponding egress address field; and

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20 on receipt of an encapsulated packet via a virtual port of the network, said encapsulated packet including a source address and an ingress address, the address assigner is operable to add an entry to the address association table associated with said virtual port when said address association table does not contain the source address in any destination address field of said address association table, said entry comprising the source address in a destination address field and the ingress address in a corresponding egress address field.

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30 29. A routing device as defined in claim 21, wherein:

each router is operable to route the packet via trunks of the network; and

35 when the packet is assigned a broadcast egress address corresponding to a distinct set of virtual ports, each router is operable to route the packet via a

restricted set of trunks containing only those trunks required to reach virtual ports in the distinct set of virtual ports corresponding to said broadcast egress address.

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30. A routing device as defined in claim 25, wherein:

each router is operable to route the packet via trunks of the network; and

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when the packet is assigned a multicast egress address corresponding to a plurality of virtual ports in a distinct set of virtual ports, each router is operable to route the packet via a restricted set of trunks containing only those trunks required to reach virtual ports in the plurality of virtual ports corresponding to said multicast egress address.

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31. A routing device as defined in claim 28, wherein each router provides IEEE 802.1 switching functionality adapted to packets encapsulated with ingress and egress addresses.

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32. A routing device as defined in claim 28, comprising a respective address assigner for each distinct subset of virtual ports, each address assigner being connected between its respective distinct subset of virtual ports and a router of the routing device.

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33. A routing device as defined in claim 32, further comprising a switching element connected between at least one address assigner and its respective distinct subset of virtual ports, said switching element being operable to multiplex the virtual ports of the respective distinct subset of virtual ports onto the address assigner.

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34. A routing device as defined in claim 33,  
wherein:

each switching element provides IEEE 802.1  
switching functionality; and

5 each router provides IEEE 802.1 switching  
functionality adapted to packets encapsulated with ingress  
and egress addresses.

35. A routing device as defined in claim 32,  
10 further comprising a plurality of VLAN demultiplexers  
connected to the router, each VLAN demultiplexer being  
connected between the router and a respective plurality of  
the address assigners, each VLAN demultiplexer being  
15 operable to route an encapsulated packet from the router  
to an address assigner associated with the ingress address  
of the encapsulated packet such that all encapsulated  
packets having a common egress address and an ingress  
address corresponding to a virtual port in a particular  
20 set of the distinct sets of virtual ports are routed to an  
address assigner associated with that egress address and  
that particular distinct set of virtual ports.

36. A routing device as defined in claim 35,  
25 further comprising:

a respective VLAN translator connected to each  
address assigner that is connected to the VLAN  
demultiplexer, each VLAN translator being operable to  
apply a respective VLAN identifier to packets received  
30 from its respective address assigner; and

a router demultiplexer connected to a plurality  
of the VLAN translators for routing packets received from  
an external router to a VLAN translator selected according  
to VLAN identifiers of the packets received from the  
35 external router.

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37. A routing device as defined in claim 35, further comprising a respective virtual private router connected to each address assigner that is connected to a VLAN demultiplexer.

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38. A routing device as defined in claim 37, further comprising a respective network address translator connected to each virtual private router for translating addresses between a respective first address space used by its virtual private router and a second address space used by an Internet router.

39. A routing device as defined in claim 38, further comprising an Internet router connected to the network address translators.

40. A routing device as defined in claim 35, further comprising:

an MPLS switch, the MPLS switch being operable to route packets between an Internet router and address assigners selected according to MPLS labels of the packets; and

a respective MPLS converter connected between each address assigner that is connected to a VLAN demultiplexer and the MPLS switch, each MPLS converter:

being operable to apply a respective MPLS label to each packet received from its respective address assigner, said MPLS label being uniquely associated with the MPLS converter; and

being operable to remove MPLS labels from packets received from the MPLS switch.

41. A method as defined in claim 8, further comprising routing an encapsulated packet from the router to an address assigner selected according to the ingress address and the egress address of the encapsulated packet such that all encapsulated packets having a common egress



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the Internet router.

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assigner; and

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45. A method as defined in claim 1, wherein at least one physical port of the network maps one-to-one onto a corresponding virtual port of network, said physical port and said corresponding virtual port being associated with a respective distinct physical address.

46. A method as defined in claim 1, wherein at least one physical port of the network maps onto a corresponding plurality of virtual ports of the network, said physical port being associated with a respective distinct physical address, and each virtual port of said corresponding plurality of virtual ports being associated with a respective distinct combination of said physical address and a respective virtual network identifier.

47. A network as defined in claim 11, wherein at least one physical port of the network maps one-to-one onto a corresponding virtual port of network, said physical port and said corresponding virtual port being associated with a respective distinct physical address.

48. A network as defined in claim 11, wherein at least one physical port of the network maps onto a corresponding plurality of virtual ports of the network, said physical port being associated with a respective distinct physical address, and each virtual port of said corresponding plurality of virtual ports being associated with a respective distinct combination of said physical address and a respective virtual network identifier.

49. A routing device as defined in claim 21, wherein at least one physical port of the routing device maps one-to-one onto a corresponding virtual port of routing device, said physical port and said corresponding virtual port being associated with a respective distinct physical address.

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